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Letter dated 24 October 2005 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

As members of the Security Council are aware, the situation with regard to the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) has seriously deteriorated. I believe that the present state of affairs represents more than just an alarming situation; it constitutes a crisis that requires the full attention of, and urgent and specific action by, the international community. I am concerned, that in the absence of concrete action, the situation could escalate and, by intent or as a result of a miscalculation, lead to another round of devastating hostilities.

The Council has been thoroughly briefed on the latest turn of events affecting this important peacekeeping operation, most recently on 19 October, both in informal consultations and at a special meeting with the troop-contributing countries. As was underlined in those briefings, Eritrea's decision to restrict all types of helicopter flights by UNMEE within Eritrean air space severely inhibits the Mission's capacity to implement its monitoring mandate, as requested by the parties in the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities of 18 June 2000, and authorized by the Security Council in its resolutions 1312 (2000) and 1320 (2000). As such, the decision also seriously affects the prospects for the implementation of the Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, signed in Algiers on 12 December 2000 by the leaders of the two countries and witnessed by representatives of Algeria, the European Union, the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), the United Nations, and the United States of America.

In addition, the Eritrean restriction dramatically affects the security of United Nations peacekeepers and their operations, to the extent that the continuing occupation of small posts in isolated places — which constitute 18 out of 40 locations — has become unsustainable and is no longer operationally viable. At the above-mentioned meeting with troop-contributing countries, the Permanent Representative of India, Ambassador Nirupam Sen, and the Permanent Representative of Jordan, His Royal Highness Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, expressed their alarm at the implications of the helicopter ban and other restrictions imposed by the Eritrean authorities, and described them as unacceptable to their Governments. They appealed to the Council to send an unequivocal and strong message, in order to reverse an increasingly untenable situation. At the same time, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, has stated to the press that members of the Eritrean Defence Force have infiltrated the Temporary Security Zone, and urged the United Nations to "take measures to restore the status quo".

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As you have been informed in the briefings mentioned above, I have conveyed my serious concern regarding these issues in a letter to the President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, and appealed to his Government to reconsider the damaging restrictions without delay. On 20 October, I received a reply in which the President states that the Security Council and I have forfeited our "relevance" on matters relating to the peace process.

In view of the above, I once again call on the Security Council to exert its maximum influence to avert a further deterioration of the situation and to ensure that the restrictions imposed on UNMEE are lifted. At the same time, after years of frustrating stalemate, it would be imperative for the Security Council — as the principal organ entrusted with the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security — to address the underlying causes of the stalemate in the peace process, including those relating to the Ethiopian position on the decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission. The concerted and resolute action of the Council will be essential in bringing about the full implementation of the Algiers Agreements and restoring peace between the two countries.

Finally, I would like to express my growing concern about the restrictions placed on humanitarian operations in Eritrea, including the significant delay in relief food distributions, the impoundment of the United Nations project vehicles and the lack of access to some of the Organization's warehouses and containers. Those decisions have had an adverse impact on humanitarian activities and have exacerbated the situation of vulnerable Eritrean communities. In addition, food insecurity remains of paramount concern, and malnutrition rates exceed the emergency threshold in many parts of the country. Irrespective of political issues and considerations, it is critical that restrictions on humanitarian operations are lifted. At the same time, I wish to stress that efforts to address the root causes of food insecurity cannot be effectively tackled until there is significant progress in the peace process.

I stand ready to work closely with the Security Council, collectively, and with key stakeholders, individually, to bring this dangerous crisis to an end, to conclude the peace process expeditiously, and to re-establish vital humanitarian activities in Eritrea.

(*Signed*) Kofi A. **Annan**